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On the Significance of Psychodynamic Discourse for the Field of Consciousness Studies

Robin S. Brown

Abstract: Despite the obvious confluence of concerns between psychodynamic psychology and the emerging field of consciousness studies, the extent to which psychodynamic thinking has factored into the consciousness literature has been limited. With widespread interest in “the unconscious” having significantly diminished, the present paper asks what might be implied in the shift towards the notion of “consciousness”—what about this cross-disciplinary designation has come to attract attention not only within the academic world, but also in the popular press? That the term does indeed invite contributions from a variety of disciplines makes the field both a meeting space, and a battleground. It is posited that the field of consciousness studies can be considered both a reaction to, and a reflection of, the evolving nature of psychoanalysis in the English-speaking world. After demonstrating the ways in which depth psychological discourse is implicated in the debates around consciousness, the author suggests why the notion of an unconscious mind might profitably be adopted in the consciousness literature. Stressing the clinical and ethical significance of an assumed capacity for creative autonomy in individuals, this paper grounds itself in a fundamental concern for the sociopolitical dimensions of the consciousness debates.

Keywords: consciousness, ethics, psychoanalysis, the unconscious

The widespread shift from psychological to biological models of mind has numerous ostensible causes, not least of these being the manifold pressures exerted on clinical practice by the pharmaceutical industry. Nevertheless, it should be admitted that a considerable share of the responsibility must fall upon psychoanalysis itself. The field’s early concern for questions of purity and fidelity to Freud engendered a constant political maneuvering so as to delimit that which was properly deemed “psychoanalytic.” Had this tendency occurred under the banner of some broader and more

inclusive signifier, the consequences may have been less adverse. Eugen Bleuler is credited with having coined “depth psychology” [Tiefenpsychologie] with just such a view in mind (Ellenberger, 1970, p. 562). While this suggested appellation never gained widespread currency¹, Kohut (1977) later adopted Bleuler’s designation in attempting to keep his own ideas related to an often hostile psychoanalytic mainstream.

¹ Freud (1914) briefly acknowledges the term only to state that it is directly equatable with “psychoanalysis” (p. 41).

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Retrieved from http://www.conscjournal.org/?page_id=59

ISSN applied for

www.conscjournal.org Page 1

Consciousness: Ideas and Research for the Twenty First Century | Spring 2016 | Vol 1 | Issue 1
Brown, R., On the significance of psychodynamic discourse for the field of consciousness studies

More recently, the term has come to be associated particularly with the Jungian community; sometimes to the extent that the notion is mistakenly thought synonymous with analytical psychology itself. Despite the efforts of those diverging from the Freudian orthodoxy, in popular perception psychoanalysis remains a far more widely recognized designation than depth psychology, and for this reason the less inclusive term tends to significantly color perception of the wider field. Recent efforts to re-evaluate the origins of depth psychology have demonstrated the extent to which Freud and his followers distorted the field's early history so as to reinforce his position as founding father (Shamdasani, 2004; Taylor, 2009). One of the consequences of this tendency has been to artificially divorce psychoanalytic thinking from the wider history of Western ideas. Because psychoanalysis has come to stand in for a whole swathe of intellectual activity, which it has at the same time disavowed, the fate of the field has influenced the history of ideas in ways that are complex and not always immediately apparent. It might be said that the Freudian legacy has, to a disproportionate extent, carried with it the responsibility for keeping alive the introspective approach to psychology. Pessimistically, it could even be argued that as a consequence of the slipshod fashion in which the early profession handled its affairs, the most significant influence psychoanalysis has had on our perceptions about the nature of mind in the present day lies merely in the role that the field played in hastening the rise of the biological reductionism that it was originally established largely in distinction to.

Coupled with the shift from a popular interest in psychoanalytic thought and the tropes of the unconscious to that of neurons and chemical imbalances is the emergence of a concern for the notion of consciousness *per*

se. Many of the frustrated and sometimes contrary hopes attendant to the psychoanalytic milieu seem now to be evidenced in the ways in which this term has come to be deployed in academic discourse. For some, the notion of consciousness reflects nothing less than the final field of inquiry waiting to be demystified by scientific positivism. A recent *New York Times* opinion piece by Princeton psychologist Michael Graziano typifies this attitude. Graziano (2014) confidently claims that there are three great scientific questions pertaining to the human condition: [1] what is our place in the universe? [2] what is our place in life? and [3] what is the relationship between mind and matter? He argues that Copernicus and Darwin have answered the first and second of these questions, while contemporary neuroscience is on the verge of answering the third by disproving the existence of consciousness altogether. Although this supposed dissolving of the idea of consciousness is certainly nothing new, Graziano's particular framing of the question is telling. He seeks to establish the notion of consciousness as the ground upon which Western science is to claim its final victory. What is particularly striking about Graziano's way of phrasing things is that the form of his argument is an unattributed reworking of a claim that suggests something quite different—not that science is about to settle matters but, quite to the contrary, that humanity's place in the universe has been thrown into radical doubt. While the names of Newton and Darwin typically figure in this appraisal, just as they do for Graziano, the question of consciousness is in fact a substitute for the name of Freud. With this amendment the whole matter is given an altogether different cast. Where Copernicus, Darwin and Freud are often invoked as a trio so as to question our pretension's of knowing, with Graziano's substitution of the subject of

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Retrieved from http://www.conscjournal.org/?page_id=59

ISSN applied for

consciousness an inversion occurs by means of which the three “big questions” are made to seemingly lock-down and confirm the truth claims of contemporary science.

It was actually Freud himself who first made the connection between his own endeavor and that of Copernicus and Darwin. This association was ostensibly forged at the time so as to explain why psychoanalysis was failing to gain widespread scientific approval. Freud (1916-17) contends that in recognizing the existence of the unconscious:

Human megalomania will have suffered its third and most wounding blow from the psychological research of the present time which seeks to prove that the ego is not even master in its own house, but must content itself with scanty information of what is going on unconsciously in its mind. (p. 285)

While the kernel of this observation may well be of fundamental significance, it is undoubtedly the case that for Freud and his followers the apparent recognition of the ego’s having been de-seated was itself sometimes made basis for its very reinstatement upon the throne of reason—in the field’s early history, the initiatory nature of a classical training analysis coupled with a technical emphasis on the role of interpretation served to promote the notion that the elect few had achieved some form of special insight not available to the general public. It is obviously ironic that in taking aim at the “megalomania” of others, Freud is nevertheless quite ready to place his own genius alongside that of Copernicus and Darwin. The relationship between self-humbling insight and a resultant tendency towards self-aggrandizing inflation has significantly marked the wider discourse of depth psychology. In the field’s early history, this tendency can be discerned in the

distinction between psychoanalysis portrayed as an objective science associated with the practice of medicine, and psychoanalysis positioned as an emancipatory endeavor fundamentally concerned with the value of the individual (e.g. Fromm, 1955; Lindner, 1953; Marcuse, 1966). The former trend is reflected in the extent to which psychoanalytic discourse was, for a time, able to influence the practice of psychiatry in the English-speaking world; while the latter tendency was less formally institutionalized and more fragmentary, often being made subject to ostracization from the medically oriented mainstream. The clinical practice of psychoanalysis at the present time is still struggling to recover from the consequences of the field’s inability to contend with the tensions implied by this theoretical split.

If, in keeping with Graziano’s (2014) position, the consciousness literature reflects, in considerable degree, the efforts of contemporary science to conquer the mind, it has also been informed by tendencies that are often quite opposed to this. In a significant editorial from *the Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Goguen et. al. (1997) contrast those fields of inquiry often construed by the mainstream as “kosher” (philosophy, neurobiology, and cognitive science) with a much broader range of paradigms commonly deemed “taboo.” This split is very much reminiscent of the one discernible in the history of depth psychology. While the “kosher” disciplines have about them a sense of institutional acceptability reminiscent of the particular sensibility pursued by classical analysis during its heyday, those fields of inquiry deemed “taboo” are reflective of much that was disavowed. The emancipatory/hermeneutic approach to analysis has come to be associated in considerable degree with ideas from phenomenology (e.g. Atwood & Stolorow, 1993; Csordas, 2012; Nissim-Sabat,

Corresponding author: robin_s_brown@hotmail.com

Retrieved from http://www.conscjournal.org/?page_id=59

ISSN applied for

2011)—a strand of philosophical discourse which has also exerted significant left-field influence in the consciousness literature (e.g. Chalmers, 1997; Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012; Gibson, 1986). Additionally, a series of resonances to the term “consciousness” might be considered that relate to critical theory and have links with the depth psychological tradition both by way of Lacanian thinking, and in terms of the relationship between interpersonal psychoanalysis and the Frankfurt school (Noerr, 2002): the Marxian notion of *false consciousness* (Engels, 1893), Durkheim’s (1893) *collective consciousness*, the more contemporary notion of *popular consciousness*, and the *consciousness raising* of American feminists and Civil Rights activists in the 1960s (Sarachild, 1973). Each of these adoptions of the term connect it with questions of ideology and power. Furthermore, we might consider the underlying influence of several other usages that are particularly associated with transpersonal approaches to the psyche: the notion of *higher consciousness* which (like “the unconscious”) has roots in German idealism (Ffytche, 2012), and *altered states of consciousness*, a notion popularized by the psychologist Charles Tart (1969).

The extent to which the term “consciousness” has been associated with both political and spiritual emancipation suggests that there is much at stake where this notion has captured popular attention within the frame of neuroscience and the attempt to “explain” consciousness. What might the implications be if popular opinion is increasingly being shaped by the notion that consciousness doesn’t exist? That such a notion might come to gain widespread currency seems absurd, and yet in the present intellectual climate is eminently conceivable. Just as moderns look back bemusedly upon the *how many angels on the head of a pin*

philosophizing of Medieval scholasticism, it may be that in years to come the idea that highly intelligent people invested considerable energy trying to refute the existence of consciousness may seem similarly mystifying. For the time being, though, the handling of this question has much resting upon it. The extent to which the debates around consciousness serve to affirm (or deny) biological reductionism, is also the extent to which these debates implicitly support (or challenge) psychiatry in being able to continue basing its assumptions on ideological constructs which favor the financial interests of the pharmaceutical and insurance industries, not to mention the stability of the wider infrastructure which depends upon the mass adherence to present modes of functioning. Clearly the neurological approach to consciousness needn’t imply this kind of reductionism. Popularizers like Sacks (1985) and Ramachandran (2011)—both of whom have been openly hospitable to psychoanalytic thinking—have stressed deep respect for the limits of neurology as a hermeneutic for lived experience. While a hardline neuroscientific attempt to explain consciousness objectively will more than likely find no value in psychodynamic thinking, in recent years a significant movement within the psychoanalytic community has developed out of a desire to reconcile psychoanalytic theory with brain science. Neuropsychanalysis seeks to establish links between brain physiology and psychoanalytic practice, and argues that perspectives in terms of both mind and brain are equally important in advancing clinical practice (Panksepp & Solms, 2012). This movement has attracted considerable support from the field of neuroscience. In the subtitle of a recent article, Damasio (2012) is explicit in arguing that psychoanalysis and neuroscience constitute a “natural alliance.”

Corresponding author: robin_s_brown@hotmail.com

Retrieved from http://www.conscjournal.org/?page_id=59

ISSN applied for

Meanwhile, Nobel laureate neuropsychiatrist Eric Kandel (2012) has voiced a belief that psychoanalysis “still stands as perhaps the most influential and coherent view of mental activity that we have” (p. 47). In light of this kind of support, it seems reasonable to argue that there is something of a lacuna in the consciousness literature with regards to the absence of a serious engagement with contemporary depth psychology.

From a clinical point of view, the manner in which the debates around consciousness shape public opinion raises important ethical questions. It cannot be emphasized sufficiently that these debates have tangible consequences for human lives (Brown, 2015). While in recent years educated opinion has tended to concern itself with the threat of fundamentalism, the rise of this tendency in the West might be seen partly as an expression of the reductiveness of contemporary psychiatry that has arguably sewn the seeds, both culturally and clinically, for the emergence of just such a climate. Perhaps the carefully justified cynicism of eliminative materialism (Churchland, 1999) perceives in fundamentalist religion both the reaction to, and the distorted reflection of this movement’s own dogmatic literalism (e.g. Blackmore, 2007; Dawkins, 2008; Dennett, 2007). In the face of advancing neuroscience, for those following in the tradition of Ryle (1949) who would refute the existence of mind itself, the claim effectively comes to be made that the individual has no form of privileged access to the nature of their own personhood. A position of this sort clearly has deep-seated political implications. When medical science attempts to secure this degree of authority for itself, perhaps we might look to employ some of the cynicism of the eliminative materialists, and ask how it comes to pass that mainstream academia has given so much credence to this kind of thinking in the

first place? Recent publications by Whitaker (2010) and Watters (2010) have explored the extent to which reductive approaches to mind are supported by economic and ideological factors influencing the production of knowledge. The working clinician encounters the consequences of these pressures on a daily basis. If a significant aspect of the early work with patients falls within the scope of psycho-education, this task becomes all the more challenging the more deeply entrenched does the culture of biological reductivism become. While psycho-education in the context of a psychodynamic treatment seeks to empower the patient to take their own experiences more seriously, objections to the legitimacy of “folk psychology” have precisely the opposite intention, focusing on claims that the common person is not sufficiently educated as to be able to experience themselves in a correct fashion (Fletcher, 1995). Where Dennett (2001) is explicit in his belief that we are not the authors of our own lives, it is unclear in what extent he *experiences* himself on this basis. A great many people seeking therapy seemingly do so precisely as a consequence of their not being able to attain a sense of self-agency, yet the present psychiatric paradigm appears only to reinforce this. Clearly any form of substantive social change has as a prerequisite a basic sense of trust in one’s own experience, as opposed to a reliance on the assumed authority of others. Washburn (2012) argues that, despite a range of criticisms directed towards the psychoanalytic conception of the ego, admitting necessary revisions the notion itself can still be considered fundamentally sound. Any critique of “homunculus” theories of mind that fail to engage not only with the political implications, but also with the vast body of clinical literature which would seem to correlate the sense of an inner person with the capacity to live a more fulfilling life, appears

Corresponding author: robin_s_brown@hotmail.com

Retrieved from http://www.conscjournal.org/?page_id=59

ISSN applied for

Consciousness: Ideas and Research for the Twenty First Century | Spring 2016 | Vol 1 | Issue 1
Brown, R., On the significance of psychodynamic discourse for the field of consciousness studies

to have dangerously overlooked much of seeming importance.

In the study of consciousness, one of the most pressing arguments in favor of retaining psychodynamic models of mind may be constituted by way of the ethical questions emphasized as a consequence of engagement in clinical practice—that is, that the notion of an unconscious mind remains deeply significant as the basis for a nomenclature emphasizing the limits of human reason and, by extension, offers the basis for an approach to the mind that is pluralistic and demonstrates a fundamental respect for uncertainty. The consciousness literature, however, has given little consideration to the relevance of psychodynamic thought, and where the topic has been broached it has usually been only with the passing intent of critiquing narrowly Freudian conceptions of the unconscious. In this connection, the claim most often encountered is that the notion of an unconscious mind is demonstrably unsound, since for something to function on the level of thought it must by definition be potentially available to thinking. The earliest objection of this sort appears to have been put forth by philosopher-psychologist Franz Brentano, who was also the first theorist to posit intentionality as the defining feature of all mental phenomena. Writing prior to Freud, Brentano (1874/1995) already seeks to contest the notion of an unconscious by stating that every mental act is by definition in some sense conscious. Having made this claim, however, he nevertheless recognizes that mental acts can be of different intensities, with mental events of a lower intensity coming to be experienced *as if* unconscious. William James (1890) argues similarly that all mentation is conscious, but that much of it occurs too quickly to make an impression on memory. Like Brentano, philosopher of consciousness Jean Gebser (1984) also disputes the

unconscious in favor of an approach conceived in terms of conscious intensities. More recently, Searle (1994) has again suggested that the notion of an unthinkable thought is not coherent—by way of what he terms *the connection principle*, he argues that unconscious mental states must be potentially available to the conscious mind.

The commonplace assumption is that thoughts come into being and have consequence only in the act of thinking them; that the existence of thoughts is dependent on our thinking. But from whence does this particular thought arise? Whatever one makes of Jaynes' (1976) theory of the bicameral mind, his work offers ample evidence of the ways in which human-beings may have not always experienced their thoughts as their own. Clearly the notion of our ideas being caused by us and thus reasonably claimed as our own private property has a complex and multifaceted history. What we've come to experience as an unbreakable linkage between our thoughts and our thinking doesn't necessarily seem to have been experienced as such by people in prior times. Speaking of an encounter in imagination with the biblical figure of Elijah, Jung (1989) reports:

He said I treated thoughts as if I generated them myself, but, according to his views, thoughts were like animals in a forest, or people in a room, or birds in the air. He said, "If you should see people in a room, you would not say that you made those people, or that you were responsible for them." Only then I learned psychological objectivity. Only then could I say to a patient, "Be quiet, something is happening." There *are* such thing as mice in a house. You cannot say you were wrong when you have a thought. For the understanding of the unconscious we must see our

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Retrieved from http://www.conscjournal.org/?page_id=59

ISSN applied for

thoughts as events, as phenomena. (p. 95)

This passage is reminiscent of post-Kleinian analyst Wilfred Bion's fundamental claim that thoughts exist prior to our being able to think them. For Bion, the mental apparatus develops out of the need to find containment for thoughts that are, at the outset, unthinkable. Grotstein (1988) suggests that Bion might reformulate Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* as: "I am, therefore I have thoughts without a thinker which demand a mind to think about them" (p. 15). While Jung and Bion both call into question whether ideas can be considered inherently the possession of our minds, the seemingly insoluble dependence between thought and thinking has also come to be questioned from the opposite angle, by way of theoretical engagement with mystical and meditative states. Forman (1997) has outlined what he terms Pure Consciousness Events, wherein awareness is sustained without object. If thinking can be present without a thought, why not thoughts without a thinker?

While acknowledging the necessary explanatory power attendant to the conception of an unconscious, Searle (1994) complains that the notion exhibits too much "unclarity" (p. 151). In so far as the notion of an unconscious mind has been adopted as a placeholder for the unspeakable, however, this seems only appropriate. Given this acknowledged lack of clarity around the subject matter, it is striking that Searle nevertheless translates Freud into terms that do an obvious disservice to the complexity of Freud's work. In particular, the notion that unconscious states can be understood as—to draw from one of Searle's own analogies—fish that appear quite the same above water as they do in the depths, is a significant misrepresentation of psychoanalytic thought.

Consider, for instance, the following passage from Freud (1900) on the waking recall of dreams:

There is no doubt, then, that it is our normal thinking that is the psychical agency which approaches the content of dreams with a demand that it must be intelligible, which subjects it to a first interpretation and which consequently produces a complete misunderstanding of it. (p. 500)

For Searle (1994), the nature of the unconscious can only be defined as "the ontology of a neurophysiology capable of generating the conscious" (p. 172). In response to this statement, Chessick (2001) claims that Freud only speaks of unconscious processes *as if* they were already mental, and to read him otherwise is a distortion (p. 671). On this basis, Chessick suggests that Freud's position might be a good deal more compatible with Searle's than Searle himself realizes. While there may be some substance to this claim, Chessick's argument might be criticized for not adequately recognizing the extent to which Freud's psychology parted ways with biology, and it certainly offers no defense for the positions of figures like Bion and Jung (Brown, 2014). A more radical response might go further, and point out that the assumption that consciousness is entirely dependent on the activity of the brain is itself an unproven assumption. Rosenbaum (2012) has set forth a distinction between consciousness of which we are conscious and consciousness of which we are unconscious. She justifies the claim that consciousness is still present even when we are—according to all neurological markers—unconscious, by citing studies that indicate how individuals under deep anesthesia or in cardiac arrest have subsequently been able to recall impressions

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Retrieved from http://www.conscjournal.org/?page_id=59

ISSN applied for

of events taking place in the operating room (p. 273). While recognizing the extent to which the phenomenology of the mind is clearly linked with the functioning of the brain, Grof (1992) observes that the assumption that consciousness has its origin in the brain is a metaphysical article of faith, and not a proven scientific fact. He offers the following analogy:

A good television repair person can look at the particular distortion of the picture or sound of a television set and tell us exactly what is wrong with it and which parts must be replaced to make it work properly again. No one would see this as proof that the set itself was responsible for the programs we see when we turn it on. (p. 5)

Contrary to Chessick's (2001) defense of the Freudian unconscious as being compatible with Searle's apparent objection to it, Freud's (1900) statement that the unconscious constitutes the "true psychical reality" (p. 613) would appear explicit in insisting upon a psychological bedrock as the proper basis for approaching psychic life, and not one that is to be reduced to the chemistry of the brain. While Freud never seems to have lost hope that his theories might eventually be corroborated by neuroscience, his approach to the mind is an avowedly psychological one. By contrast, Searle's (1994) significant claim that consciousness is ontologically subjective seems not to have penetrated the substance of his own thinking. In his concern to avoid slipping into idealism, Searle in fact states that the distinction he draws between *intrinsic* intentionality (that which is attributed to "true" mental states) and *as-if* intentionality (that which only gives the impression of being intentional without, it is claimed, being so) is necessary since "the price of giving it up

would be that everything would become mental" (p. 156). In keeping with this metaphysical commitment, Searle claims that attributions to the unconscious are not intended to be taken metaphorically; that they "lose their explanatory power if we do not take them literally" (p. 156). Not apparently considering that what a person experiences as "literal" might itself be subjectively determined, Searle posits his own assumptions as universally applicable and proceeds on the basis that "literally" can only mean having intrinsic intentionality which, by his line of reasoning, comes to mean being objectively true on the basis of neurophysiology. But if consciousness is considered ontologically subjective, what sense does it make to insist that the explanatory power of the unconscious rests upon its being regarded as objectively valid? While emergence theory appears to offer the promise of providing a scientific basis for what Freeman (2003) dubs "nonreductive physicalism," the scientific respectability of this notion would seem to rest upon ignoring how the emergent property [consciousness] of the system subtending it [the brain] is the very means by which the system subtending it comes to be postulated as such in the first place². Searle's (2002) vigorous resistance to being labeled a property dualist is indicative of an attempt to stave off the metaphysical problems that clearly threaten when one takes an emergentist position on the subject of consciousness.

If we are to follow Freud's claim that the unconscious is the true psychical reality, then the extent to which something can be thought "literally" true can only be posed as a question of faith. The decisive turning point in this respect was Freud's rejection of the theory of infantile seduction in favor of his

²For an examination of how this problem expresses itself in the psychodynamic literature, see Brown (2013).

later belief that the notion of a “real world” event of this sort was in most cases produced by a way of an infantile wish fulfillment. The shift thus implied was to place primary emphasis on the fantasy of the patient over and above any question of what the clinician might imagine had “really” happened (Freud, 1916-17, p. 368). In recognizing the psychological primacy of the patient’s fantasy, objections to the Cartesian theatre start to seem moot, and might more reasonably be considered demonstrative of the limits of physicalism than of the need for a more radical skepticism. Dennett’s (1992) claim that the self is the center of a narrative fiction can be regarded as quite correct, but his implicit assumption that a fiction doesn’t have its own ontological gravity is the reflection of a characterologically determined article of faith in the primacy of matter. Refuting the Cartesian theater on the evidence of experimental psychology makes little sense since, as Chalmers (1995) has argued, the phenomenon itself remains. Likewise, to criticize homunculus theories on the basis of an infinite regress is only legitimate should the notion be put forward in an effort to “explain” consciousness, not if it is used to describe (and loosely at that) something of the manner in which many people introspectively experience themselves. To remain in a literalistic mode and insist upon asking who thinks for the homunculus, is surely to have missed the point.

Approaching the topic of consciousness with integrity, we have to contend with the extent to which the field’s subject matter is unavoidably implicated in the act of attempting to study it. Jung (1947) refers to this struggle as the absence of an Archimedean point of reference (p. 216). In the early history of psychology, this fundamental problem was referred to as “the personal equation.” The only way that the

discipline of psychology was ultimately able to respond to this challenge while maintaining its tenuous credentials as a science, was to act as though having obviated the personal factor altogether by focusing only on observable behavior. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the recent re-emergence of consciousness as an acceptable topic of academic study took place outside the domain of psychology proper; arising, perhaps necessarily, as a transdisciplinary phenomenon. In so far as the metaphysics of Baconian science come to hold sway exclusively, then the field is perhaps destined to swallow itself.

If the founding act of neuroanatomy can be thought constituted in the cleaving of right hemisphere from left, then it seems only appropriate given the recurring significance that the motif of a division into two has been observed to exhibit in the world’s creation mythology (von Franz, 1972). It might further be noted that in the very act of division signifying the field’s creation, the left brain is implicitly privileged from the outset. Under the influence of this kind of thinking, the fledgling field of consciousness studies has been considerably preoccupied with the question of whether that which the discipline purports to examine can even be said to exist in the first place. Might this tendency reflect an ironic manifestation of what Freud referred to as “the return of the repressed”? As the notion of the unconscious continues to go largely unacknowledged within the field, is that which is unconscious in consciousness studies fast coming to be the notion of consciousness itself? The present paper has sought to show that efforts to redress the balance of this conversation might be aided by means of a more direct engagement with the ethical, clinical, and theoretical dimensions of psychodynamic discourse.

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